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ABSTRACT

Monitoring school performance has become an overriding concern in American political and educational circles, and some of that scrutiny is being directed at the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). However, there is concern that pressure to prove the effectiveness of Essential Schools may overshadow efforts to actually improve education. Taking Stock is a project that uses a 9-year longitudinal study to track students in Essential Schools (ES) through high school and 5 years afterward. Coalition schools monitor attendance and graduation rates, standardized test scores, and college acceptances. A survey of 1,762 teachers at 46 Essential Schools divided educators into high involvement (HI) and low involvement (LI) groups. According to the survey, HI teachers were more involved in cooperative-planning teams, enjoyed more favorable teaching conditions, and were more likely to teach English or social studies. A survey of 427 ES and 185 non-ES students revealed that ES students are more likely to plan to go to college, to have jobs but spend less time at them, and to study more. A different way to assess the effectiveness of Essential Schools reform is to look at the whole system, not only student performance, but changes in climate and policy in school districts as well. (JPT)

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THE PRACTITIONER

nassp

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

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Taking Stock: How Are Essential Schools Doing?

A wry joke is making the rounds of the education world: John F. Kennedy is holding a press conference in 1960 to announce his plan to land an American on the moon. "The project will take 10 years," he says, "but the first 6 years will be spent building a giant telescope so we can look at the astronaut when he finally gets there."

Looking carefully at how schools are doing has become an overriding concern in American political and educational circles during recent years and the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) rightly comes in for its fair share of scrutiny. But many Coalition members fear that, like that giant telescope, the push for accountability may soon overshadow the very classroom change it aims to stimulate.

The questions people ask are tough and varied, but in the end they come down to one: "Is there any evidence that students do better when they attend Essential Schools?" This cuts to the vulnerable heart of Essential School reform, and precisely because it is so complicated, it may tempt schools in the midst of change to offer simplistic or skewed responses that could skirt the real issues involved.

The chief problem of coming to answers, of course, is that the question of how Essential Schools are doing can be approached from so many different perspectives. How students are doing on conventional measures like basic skills test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, and college acceptances is easy enough to measure. But how do we track their thoughtfulness, their originality or creativity, their ability to handle the ill-structured problems that show up in real life?

If the aim is to determine whether the Coalition itself is a success, do we judge that by the number of schools involved or by the depth of what is going on in those schools? Is the assessment aimed at quality control—making all Essential Schools "stand for" the same thing—or does it attempt to assess diverse grassroots efforts despite wide variations in practice?

And what is at stake in being seen as a success—higher teacher salaries, more professional development, or a school's very existence in a marketplace that involves more and more choice?

Without a context that acknowledges such questions, any drive for accountability must run aground. Still, self-evaluation is a critical part of the Essential Schools effort, and the struggle to frame that evaluation in terms that are both thoughtful and precise, both qualitative and quantitative, has occupied the Coalition increasingly in recent years.

Serving as an umbrella over these efforts is a new Coalition project, Taking Stock. Under its aegis, a nine-year longitudinal study following Essential School students through high school and the five years afterward will soon begin.

Already underway is a concerted attempt to gather similar information from Coalition member schools about the progress of their students along carefully framed measures. And, a high-level panel of outside advisers will soon be formed to review the work of Taking Stock and external studies of the Coalition, and to make recommendations regarding additional assessment research.

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Collecting and Tracking Figures

If each school community would articulate its standards of excellence clearly, and if it routinely exhibited them through portfolios and public performances, communities would have evidence of how their students were doing.

However, very few of the more than 100 Coalition member schools have reached that point. So how can the public judge whether the Coalition's principles are worth working and paying for?

Individual member schools in the Coalition are expected to keep track of their attendance rates, graduation rates, standardized test scores, and college acceptances. Some schools keep better records than others, but where comparative data are available (especially in those charter schools that have been with the Coalition since its inception in 1984), improvement is clear in all those areas. (See Figure 1).

Pasadena High School
2925 E. Sierra Madre Blvd.
Pasadena, Calif. 91107-1846
Judy Codding, Principal

Pasadena High School is entering its fourth year of working with Coalition ideas; the 600 students who began ninth grade in 1989 are now juniors with two years of Essential schooling behind them. The dropout rate at Pasadena was 35 to 40 percent when Codding arrived four years ago. "But in that first Coalition class of 600, we can account for all but 7 students still being in school," she says. "Attendance in our core Essential School classes is up to around 93 percent. And the percentage of D's and F's in those classes has gone from around 40 percent to 20 to 25 percent."

Codding is looking for funds with which she can give the eleventh-grade Stanford Achievement Test this fall to the same students who took the mandated ninth-grade version on entering the Essential School program two years ago.

"We also follow their course grades, which reflect how they do on performance-based tests," she says. "We track disciplinary suspensions and expulsions. And of course we're very interested in how many kids are actually going to graduate."

Early surveys by the Coalition indicate that more teachers than students appear to be noticing changes in their Essential School experiences. "It reminds us to be realistic," CES Chairman Theodore Sizer says. "We're talking about changing the direction of a very large vessel. When you spin the wheel, the people in the pilot house may experience the change, but it takes a long time for the ship to move noticeably."

It takes time, Sizer points out, for the changes teachers note—like spending more time talking about learning in faculty meetings—to directly affect the actual experience of students. "If you look at kids who have been at it a long time, you might see more marked changes."

Central Park East Secondary School
1573 Madison Ave.
New York, N.Y. 10029-3819
Deborah Meier, Principal

For a good look at students who have been at it a long time, there may be no better person to turn to than Deborah Meier, principal of what is one of the Coalition's most advanced schools, Central Park East Secondary School in New York City's East Harlem District No. 4. The school has a head start over others in the Coalition because it was an Essential School from the beginning.

In 1991 the first class graduated from its Senior Institute, which replaces at CPESS the conventional eleventh and twelfth grades. Although a number of the students who entered the Senior Institute two years ago are staying on for another year of study, all who graduated are going on to college, and all but two of these to four-year colleges.

Meier has both a strong sense of who those students are and ambitious plans for tracking their future progress.

"Our students are enormously determined, hard-working, and articulate," she says, "and I think that's one reason colleges have been so impressed with them in interviews. They talk easily to adults—about themselves, about education, about the things they are interested in. Because our school is built around conversation, these kids feel at home with different conversational styles among adults. They know their teachers as adults, and so they're used to what adults interested in intellectual things are expecting. This is not true for most high school kids; it's one reason I believe so strongly that schools must be smaller, or broken into smaller units like houses."

In the long run, Meier says, one must measure students' success by how well they do in life—their works and deeds. "If we define 'well-educated' as 'thoughtful and reflective,'" she says, "it's hard to see how nonreflective, nonthoughtful decontextualized exams could ever capture it."

Toward this end, CPESS will track the progress of 50 students who graduated this June, following not only hard data but issues like self-esteem and ability

FIGURE 1
ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS' PERFORMANCE: SOME PRELIMINARY FIGURES

Note: Schools in different states and communities collect data in different ways, and students are selected for Essential School programs in different ways. Cross-district comparisons are invalid; bear in mind that these data may legitimately be compared only for past performances or to general districtwide data collected in the same manner. What follows is a sampling of records submitted by schools.

1. ATTENDANCE AND DROPOUT RATES

Central Park East Secondary School (New York City):

Central Park East Secondary School attendance rate, 1990-91: 90.1%
New York City Public Schools official attendance rate, 1990-91: 82.3%
Central Park East Secondary School dropout rate, 1990-91: 0.4%
New York City Public Schools official dropout rate, 1990-91: 6.6%

Hope High School (Providence, R.I.):

Hope Essential School dropout rate, 1987-88: 9%
City of Providence official dropout rate, 1987-88: 44.9%

Paschal High School (Fort Worth, Tex.):

Paschal Essential School dropout rate, 1990-91: 0%
Paschal "regular" High School dropout rate, 1990-91: 10%

2. ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Hixson High School (Chattanooga, Tenn.):

Hixson Essential School graduation rate, 1990-91: 92%
Hixson "regular" High School graduation rate, 1990-91: 81%

Pleasure Ridge Park High School (Jefferson Cty., Ky.):

Essential School program students with no failures: 81%
"Regular" school students with no failures: 73%

Thayer High School (Winchester, N.Y.):

1986 (pre-Essential status) California Achievement Test scores, grades 7-10: 49th percentile
1988 California Achievement Test scores, grades 7-10: 58th percentile

3. PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Hixson High School (Chattanooga, Tenn.):

Hixson Essential School students (who are all "at risk"), going on to higher education, 1990-91: 75%
Hixson "regular' High School students going on to higher education, 1990-91: 80%

Thayer High School (Winchester, N.H.):

Thayer Essential School graduates, 1990-91: 62% went on to higher education
Thayer High School graduates (pre-Essential status, 1981): 10% went on to higher education

Walbrook High School (Baltimore, Md.):

Walbrock Essential School graduates, 1988-89: about 50% went on to higher education
City of Baltimore School System graduates, 1988-89: 11.1% went on to higher education

to handle challenge.

"This is a lot of work, and I don't know how expensive it will be, " Meier says. "But for me it is more useful than any national assessment. It's perfectly appropriate for schools to boast about different things. Private schools have always been under less pressure to use traditional assessment, for instance, because they could say 100 percent of their students went on to college. But if a school wants to brag about how many of its students go into political life or into the arts, or make a difference somehow, that's a value system too."

Brimmer and May School **69 Middlesex Rd.**
Anne Reenstierna, **Chestnut Hill, Mass. 02167**
Headmistress

Successes like those at Central Park East and Pasadena sometimes lead people to conclude that Essential School principles make the most dramatic changes at big city schools with large minority populations and the problems of urban unrest. But at Brimmer and May, a small private school in Chestnut Hill, Mass., which has just graduated its first class of seniors who started Essential Schooling in the ninth grade, headmistress Anne Reenstierna declares emphatically otherwise.

"I've been here for 18 years, and it's true that our students have always been motivated and good achievers," she says. "But I have seen a real difference in the classrooms since we began in the Coalition. Students don't just answer the questions we ask, listen, and take notes. They are highly articulate, they have opinions on everything and are ready to question your opinions and your facts. They look at questions from a much broader, interdisciplinary perspective—that's very different.

"I was in a class on the Holocaust recently, and during the discussion students brought in examples from the apartheid system, from the American civil rights movement, and from Kohlberg's levels of moral development. They initiated most of the questions; the teacher hardly spoke at all."

Shortly before graduation, Brimmer and May seniors wrote extensive evaluations of their high school experience, which were overwhelmingly positive, Reenstierna says. "Now other aspects of school life will need to change to reflect that greater student involvement," she notes. They will be working more with teachers and administrators on critical issues like curriculum, self-evaluation, and long-range planning.

Common Measures

Measures like attendance and discipline may be one indication of student engagement, which is so hard to pin down otherwise. So when schools show dramatic improvements in these areas, Theodore Sizer suggests, one should look carefully at what they are doing right. "I'm beginning to believe, for example, that small schools, or a house system in big schools, do better than big schools on measures like attendance and discipline," he says. "If they know someone notices, kids show up and they don't cut up so much."

In schools where such things aren't a problem, as in many affluent suburban schools, he notes, significant changes in student engagement are harder to judge, short of sitting in on classes to observe how actively the students are using their minds.

Even with simpler indicators like attendance, however, schools differ widely in how (or if) they define and report data; and the Coalition has run up against frustrations in trying to assemble comparable information on student progress across member schools. This is a major challenge of the new Taking Stock effort, which aims to gather and coordinate a broad range of information on just how Essential School students fare, and to publish an annual accounting of that information.

Already, the Coalition has commissioned a pilot study for a substantial research project conducted under the Taking Stock umbrella, and its findings have just landed on the Coalition's desks. It will lead to a series of annual "Common Measures" reports, says Rick Lear, the CES senior researcher who coordinated the effort.

"Our goal is first to establish the uniform collection of data around the 'common measures' such as attendance and the like," he says. "Then we'll attempt to establish new 'uncommon measures' to follow students with ways to track less easily quantified qualities such as thoughtfulness, problem solving, decency."

Teacher Common Measures

Teachers who are highly involved in Essential School activities say they work harder than they did before, but they also enjoy teaching more and are more likely to recommend it as a career. They notice changes in the intellectual habits of their students, although students overall do not report such a change.

The Common Measures survey findings appear below in summary; but what does not show up when the data are compiled are the substantial and fascinat-

ing variations (revealed in the individual schools' replies) in how various schools are introducing and interpreting Essential School principles.

In some schools, for example, Essential School teachers experience more respect from their colleagues; in others, it's quite the opposite. Almost no Essential Schools surveyed in the pilot study have altered their schedules into longer blocks, but where a school has actually done so, even those who are uninvolved have longer periods. Few schools are using portfolio assessments, whether they are very involved in the Coalition or not. Findings like this are primarily useful not because they prove anything, but because they shed light on the political problems of change.

Responses were gathered from 1,762 teachers in 46 Essential Schools, by Kyle Peck, a professor of education at Pennsylvania State University. The survey was commissioned by the Coalition as a pilot study only—intended not to be conclusive but to explore what questions might be usefully asked in a continuing survey to be launched by the Coalition's Taking Stock effort.

Seventy-one schools were asked to survey all teaching faculty, regardless of the level of Essential School (ES) involvement. Among the 46 schools that responded, the level of participation in the Essential School program varied from 24 percent to 97 percent.

Teachers reported where they stood on a five-step scale of involvement in the Essential School effort within their buildings; for simplicity we will refer here to teachers who called themselves highly involved as HI, and those who said they had lower involvement as LI. Bear in mind that self-reporting is known to be a less reliable measure of actual behavior than independent observation.

What follows reports only the statistically significant responses by teachers, except as noted. They fall roughly into four categories.

Structural Differences

- Sixty percent of all HI teachers are involved with a cooperative planning team, suggesting a strong correlation. The same percentage of HI teachers have at least 30 minutes of team planning time a day, and one-fifth have more than one hour. Most spend this time with their team, discussing curriculum and related matters, individual students, and team management issues. (Social conversations hold steady across groups.)
- An increasing level of ES involvement does seem to reduce the number of students for whom teachers are responsible. While almost one-third of HI teachers have fewer than 80 students, more than one-fifth still have more than 175 students over a year's time.
- At higher levels of ES involvement, it appears, teachers have four or fewer class periods on an average day. At lower levels of involvement, five or six periods a day is more common.
- The greater their ES involvement, the more likely teachers will have 90-minute (or longer) blocks of class time. While half the HI teachers still have no access to 90-minute blocks, one-third of HI teachers have access to 90-minute blocks four to five times per week.
- English and social studies teachers are more likely to be highly involved in Essential School programs than teachers in other subject areas. Whereas half the overall faculty in most schools fall into four major areas (English, math, social studies, and science), almost two-thirds of HI teachers are in these areas. Elective teachers and special education teachers report much lower involvement.

Teachers' and Students' Activities

- Higher levels of ES involvement are related to increased use of exhibitions, demonstrations, and other nontraditional evaluation methods. More than half of HI teachers use these methods for more than 40 percent of their grading. One-fifth of HI teachers, however, use these methods for less than 20 percent of their grading.
- While 46 percent of all teachers reported an increase in workload compared to the previous year, 57 percent of HI teachers reported workload increases.
- ES schools may spend less formal meeting time on administrative matters, and high ES involvement is related to more formal meeting time spent on curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment issues and to discussing student behavior (though teachers' general conversation and griping level remains the same).

Informal conversation about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment issues also goes up with ES involvement, but not conversation about student behavior. Informal conversations show less general conversation and griping in ES teachers, and less time talking about non-school matters.

- In class, HI teachers spend less time on administrative matters, less time delivering instructions to students, less time lecturing (though only 6.6 percent of all respondents claim to lecture more than half the time), more time coaching, slightly more time leading class discussions, and more time participating in dis-

cussions in a role other than leader.

• More HI teachers have responsibility for an advisory group, and the group tends to be smaller (around 16-20) than those of LI teachers. But still, almost half of totally involved ES teachers don't have advisory groups at all. HI teachers are more likely to have their advisees in class as students.

• ES involvement doesn't seem to make a difference in student tardiness, which 65 percent of those surveyed said was a problem; but teachers perceive absenteeism as less of a problem when ES involvement goes up. HI teachers also appear to perceive student behavior as a problem less often.

Opinions

• As ES involvement increases, so does teachers' strength of enjoyment of teaching, and they are more likely to recommend teaching as a career. But most teachers in these schools, even LI ones, do like teaching.

• More ES-involved teachers seem to know and strongly indicate respect for the other teachers in their school, to strongly agree that their personal relationships with most students are meaningful, to feel that staff "really cares" about the students, and to be satisfied with their jobs.

There's not much difference between the groups as to whether teachers feel liked and respected by other teachers in the school. But high-level ES involvement does go along with stronger support for and respect for the building administrator.

• More HI teachers than LI teachers seem to feel that school prepares students for the future, although the numbers are not striking. They are more likely to believe that students are being better prepared to work independently, that teachers believe all students can succeed, that parents are well-informed of their children's progress (though the level of parent awareness, they feel, is still quite low), that students learn a great deal in class.

High-level involvement seems to be associated with a strong belief that students are learning to work well with other people and that school is helping them learn to use their minds well.

• Although approximately 90 percent of teachers overall reported liking and respecting their students and having high expectations for them, HI teachers like their students more strongly, respect them more, and agree more strongly that they have high expectations for them. And they believe more strongly that their students like and respect them (although more than 80 percent of teachers overall believe this).

HI teachers more strongly agree that students respond well to their teaching methods, while LI teachers are more likely to agree or to be neutral on this.

Characteristics

• Age, gender, and years of experience in education do not much affect ES participation. But those with more education seem to take part more. Only a few of even the most involved claim to use all the nine Common Principles; 45 percent use "some" but not "most."

Student Common Measures

Responses were requested from students in nine Essential Schools—both students who participated in Essential School activities (called "ES students" here) and those who did not. Surveys were given to an equal number of ES and non-ES students in each school, but responses came in from 427 ES students and 185 non-ES students. (The statistics that result have been adjusted to reflect this.)

Kyle Peck, who headed the Common Measures pilot study from which these preliminary findings come, points out that interpretation of these results must be tempered by an understanding that "Essential School involvement" means different things from school to school, in terms of both the time students spend in ES-related activities and the nature of the activities themselves.

Even the "non-ES" students' responses, he warns, cannot be viewed as representative of students in non-Coalition schools; the very fact that a school has chosen to participate in the Coalition may reflect schoolwide differences from non-participating schools.

Finally, data are reported by the students themselves rather than observed by outsiders and are subject to the widely recognized tendency of adolescents to report immediate rather than long-range reactions. And, although the study did ask schools to give the surveys to a representative sample of students in both categories, Peck's group did not monitor this, so the sample may be skewed in unintended ways.

A sampling of the study's findings that were statistically significant follows.

Personal Data and Attitudes

• ES students were more likely to report plans to go to college, while non-ES students were more likely to report plans to go to a vocational/technical school.

• ES students were more likely to report that their fathers had completed high school but not gone to college. Non-ES students were more likely to report not

knowing about their father's educational level. The mothers' educational levels were not significantly different between the two groups.

- ES students were more likely to have jobs, but to spend less time working on their jobs.
- Most students in both groups think that they are good students, that school is preparing them to work on their own, and that school is preparing them for the future. ES students are more likely to believe and to believe more strongly that they control their own futures.

Classroom Work and Studies

- ES students spend more time outside school studying and engaging in school-related work.
- ES students are more likely to consider the workload in school unreasonable. (About a third of ES students find the load reasonable, while a quarter find it unreasonable; the rest had no opinion.) Non-ES students feel that their homework is more important than their ES peers do.
- Non-ES students are more likely to agree that too much emphasis is put on grading as opposed to learning.
- Although current research generally reports that in most class discussions only a few people really participate, 55 to 61 percent of both groups responding here said they participate in discussions often.
- A majority of both ES and non-ES students report that half or less of their school day is spent learning important things. Only about 40 percent look forward to going to school, and only half report that they work hard in school. No significant difference between the groups shows up in these matters.
- Only about one-third of students in both groups believe school is helping them learn to solve real problems. Almost three-quarters of them say there are things they'd like to learn about that aren't taught in school, and 80 percent say they enjoy learning things outside school. But two-thirds of all students surveyed believe what they are learning in school is important.
- Almost one in five students in both groups report they cheat in school.

Teacher-Student Relationships

- ES students are more likely to call their teachers consistently demanding; their counterparts rate teachers on both extremes of the scale.
- ES students say they get more personal attention from their teachers, as measured by asking students how much time in a day their teachers spend talking "just to you."
- ES students believe slightly more than their peers that teachers care about them, but the difference was not quite statistically significant. Surprisingly, few in both groups—60 percent overall—report their teachers like them, and only 57 percent say that they have their teachers' respect. [Note that 90 percent of teachers surveyed said they liked and respected their students.]

Can more qualitative anecdotal evidence help in assessing how the Coalition is doing? To find out, the Taking Stock effort hired Donna Muncey, an ethnographer who spent the last several years documenting and analyzing school change in a number of Essential Schools.

She will head an ambitious nine-year study, following 50 to 75 Essential School students through high school and the five years that follow. "We will probably interview parents, teachers, friends, and employers of the students," Muncey says, "to see if we can tell whether their school experience actually made a difference in how well they use their minds."

The project is not unprecedented. In the 1930s and early 1940s, the Progressive Education Association tracked 1,500 students from progressive high schools through four years of college, comparing their performance with that of traditionally prepared students. On conventional measures the students did not do much better than their peers, but on tests of problem solving or creativity they did markedly better—and the more boldly their high school had altered its curriculum, the better their performance.

This so-called Eight Year Study lends weight, Ted Sizer says, to his hunch that the Essential Schools that are moving most assertively are also the ones where measurable results are most dramatic. "If the faculty identifies what ails a school and takes bold measures to remedy it," he says, "you'll see very visible changes in student performance."

Looking at Systematic Change

A whole different angle on measuring the effectiveness of the Essential School reform effort is to look at whether change is happening systemwide—not only in terms of student achievement, but by assessing climate and policy shifts at the school district, and state levels.

For example, one can gauge success by how much say a school actually has over what it teaches and how. Or one can ask how much planning time its faculty has, how many opportunities teachers have for professional development, even how they are evaluated and how

much they are paid. Are the district and state replacing conventional standardized tests with new techniques of performance assessment, to bolster such efforts in individual classrooms? Are teachers being allowed to cross subject-area lines without red tape?

At the Education Commission of the States, the chief challenge for the Coalition's Re:Learning initiative is to line up state and district policies so they support individual schools and teachers in the throes of classroom change.

"When all the different camps—special ed, Chapter One, accelerated ed, vocational ed, and Re:Learning—stop being independent camps and start working closely together, we will see real movement," says Re:Learning's Bob Palaich. "We need schools to be internally coherent, not just to have awards on the wall."

These are messy issues, and they tend to frustrate attempts to neatly assess just how the Coalition is doing. For just that reason, outside observers like Donna Muncey and Patrick McQuillan of the School Ethnography Project recommend tracking its progress with measures that clearly identify what level of the system is being assessed. Designing flexible research that spans a long period of time and crosses levels, they suggest, will better reveal answers in their context.

A true and sober assessment of whether Essential Schools are really working must probably wait until many years have passed. But Central Park East's Deborah Meier speaks passionately about how to reach answers in the meantime.

"What the Coalition is saying about high school education is itself an answer to the question of respectful assessment in this country—by the community, by teachers, and by outsiders," she says. "That's how we should approach it—each school working through its own assessment with its own community and making it public. Commonalities will appear in threads and patterns, and maybe a system of national assessment will be the theory deduced from that collection of assessments.

"I think of my friends who are well-educated people," she says, "and how different they are. Some hate novels, some can't stand anything but novels. They write in different ways, think in different styles, have different areas of strength. Stop trying to invent *the* well-educated person that all schools should produce!"

This *Practitioner* was written by Kathleen Cushman, editor of *Horace*, the official newsletter of the Coalition of Essential Schools, published at Brown University, Providence, R.I. An expanded version of this report appeared as Volume 8, Number 1 (September 1991) of *Horace*.

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